

All Things To All Men

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

How should Christians relate to culture? How can we be in the world but not of it? The second person of the Trinity came into the world as Jesus of Nazareth, into a particular country, town, and family in order to identify with and save us. Paul follows his example and tells us how to serve people so that they may come to know Christ.

Becoming All Things

Paul is free but makes himself a servant to all in order to win the more (v19). He is willing to be a Jew for the Jews, as one without the law to those without it, and weak for the weak (vv20-22). This doesn't mean he has multiple personalities or that he's good at changing his wardrobe. It means he understood and shared the concerns of the people he ministered to. We believe that all people bear God's image and, though fallen, by common grace endorse and pursue good things. The Israelites in Babylon were supposed to seek the peace of the city by participating in it (Jer. 29:5-7). Christians ought to be for their neighborhood, city, county, state, and country not in a blind and absolute sense, but out of gratitude and in obedience to God. This is why we pray for our officials and want everyone to thrive (1 Tim. 2:2). Paul took pains to identify with the Jews. He had Timothy circumcised, took a Nazirite vow before witnessing in the synagogue (Acts 18:18-19), paid for the ceremonial purification expenses of some Jews to refute false charges, and customarily went into the town synagogue to reason from the Scriptures about Jesus (Acts 17:2-4). We know most Jews in the first century didn't receive Jesus as the Messiah, but many did as a result of studying the Scriptures and hearing Paul explain in terms they could understand. In order to reach the Gentiles he went where they were. In Athens this meant the marketplace and Areopagus where he quotes their shrines and poets in order to explain the truth (Acts 17:17-18, 22-34). He finds as much common ground as he can and says everything in love so that his hearers will come to know Jesus Christ. Even though he is rejected many times, he keeps listening, loving, and preaching the gospel. How do we feel about our neighbors? What do we know about what they think?

In the World, But Not of It

How do you know if you are becoming all things to all men in order to save some, versus becoming all things because you are a coward who has to fit in? Paul says that even when he is with Gentiles, he is still under the law of Christ (v21). The law has been fulfilled and transformed in Christ, not done away with. The Corinthians could eat meat offered to an idol, but not offer meat to idols. No matter how much a Christian has in common with someone who isn't a Christian yet, the differences will become apparent, which is the whole point. Jesus would eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners, but stay sober. He was noticeably different. So even as Christians participate in culture we uphold Scripture and are distinct. We might love nature like Pacific Northwesterners, but we'll worship God with His people on the

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Lord's Day. We care for creation but resisted faddish alarmism. We can have a glass of wine in Woodinville but not four. We can resist political rulers but not despise them. Paul became a Jew to Jews and a Gentile to Gentiles in order to make Jesus known and offer the forgiveness of sins in Him. Six times in this passage he states his hope to win and save people. Those who hear will either receive or reject the gospel, so we should be courageous and patient, counting the cost ahead of time. The church teaches the Bible regardless of what the culture thinks because we love God and love people. Our goal is to offer grace to our entire culture, and not just a subcultural or mono-generational group within it.

Participating in the Gospel

Becoming all things to all men and sharing the gospel with people is not just something the church does; it's something the church is. We are a sent people, and this is what we do when we go. In sharing the good news Paul partakes of it himself (v23). Jesus is the one who became all things for all men in the most radical way in His incarnation so that we might be saved. His holiness and righteousness did not prevent Him from identifying with sinners and loving them, but compelled Him to do so. This is why we are united (and being united) in the church, and why we are sent out into the world with the gospel. Jesus became one of us to love and save us, and He walks with us now right where we are.